

Public buildings and private opportunities: some dynamics in Pompeii's urban development

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Pompeii's urban fabric presents a complicated palimpsest of construction, amalgamation, fission, renovation, and destruction, each being a reflection of the current social, economic and political realities at the moment the work was accomplished. Taken together, these data reveal how changing socio-cultural values gradually altered the face of the urban environment over time.¹ However, while the overall transformation of the urban fabric is clearly a collective reflection of shifting concerns, it was really the actions of individuals that served to translate these trends into the physical reality that survives in the archaeological record. It was their particular decisions, undertaken in response to localised stimuli but expressing broad cultural trends and fashions, that served to produce, piece by piece, the complex and layered tapestry of the urban environment. Yet archaeological data only rarely provide the detail necessary to be able to identify the specific, small-scale motivations behind structural changes and the sequence of development, much less the ability to assess the positive or negative outcomes of particular decisions. Cases where it is possible to do so provide a rare window onto the localised, small-scale and often personal dynamics taking place within the broader process of urbanisation. Such cases emphasize the central rôle of individual actors in reacting to and reifying the forces of urban transformation through their private construction activities.

Investigations undertaken by the Via Consolare Project (VCP), which has worked since 2006 to uncover and document the history of urban development in *Insula VII 6*,² have produced evidence permitting just such inferences to be attempted; they illuminate how local factors and individual choices, in combination with changing socio-cultural priorities, determined the appearance and composition of a Pompeian neighbourhood. These data hint at the local factors driving change, suggest the individual decisions reached by property owners' response to them, and may even provide a means of assessing the positive and negative consequences of those choices. The interconnected developmental histories of the properties in the *insula*, combined with the unusual detail provided by the Vesuvian sites, encourage the exploration of more speculative interpretative scenarios than it might normally be wise to attempt. Such risks can bear fruit, since the scenarios to be suggested for *Insula VII 6* permit a deeper consideration of how municipal expropriation and municipal action might have functioned. While the end results of this inquiry are admittedly somewhat speculative, they remain grounded in evidence produced by archaeological examination and stratigraphic excavation, and may be considered one plausible scenario to explain the changes that took place on the E side of this *insula* from the 2nd c. B.C. to the early 1st c. A.D. This narrative highlights not only a persistent and repeated rôle of municipal construction and expropriation as driving forces behind urban transformation

¹ For discussion of the urbanisation of Italy, and particularly the need for archaeological data, see N. D. G. Morley, "Urbanisation and development in Italy in the late Republic," in L. De Ligt and S. J. Northwood (edd.), *People, land, and politics: demographic developments and the transformation of Roman Italy 300 BC–AD 14* (Leiden 2008) 126.

² Publication of the preliminary phasing for the block can be found at M. A. Anderson *et al.*, "Via Consolare Project – 2007-2011 field seasons in Insula VII 6," *FOLD&R* 247 (2012) = [www.fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-it-2012-247.pdf](http://fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-it-2012-247.pdf)